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War on the Home Front

Gen. William C. Westmoreland's speech to the Associated Press luncheon was a full-scale counterattack on critics of American policy in Vietnam. It was clearly promoted by the Johnson Administration as a form of domestic psychological warfare.

Counterattacks are often made in a hurry and sometimes reflect desperation. This one was no exception. In their haste, the general and the Administration relied heavily on the platitudes of the past, but desperation led them into rash judgments and conflicting statements.

The Administration obviously bears the essential burden of blame for a spectacle which sank to dismal depths as the general scorned the concept of ceasefire and denounced the "unpatriotic acts" of those who participate in anti-war protests.

It is hardly extraordinary for generals to oppose ceasefires in wartime or to decry dissent behind the lines. They are trained to fight wars and, in private strategy sessions, fighting is the policy they almost invariably espouse.

But it is extraordinary for an Administration to bring the supreme commander in Vietnam home so that he may publicly reject the idea of a ceasefire only four months after UN Ambassador Goldberg, in the name of the United States, wrote to UN Secretary General U Thant:

... We turn to you, therefore, with the hope and the request that you will take whatever steps you consider necessary to bring about the necessary discussion which could lead to such a ceasefire. . . .

If that appeal still stands, then Gen. Westmoreland's remarks about a ceasefire

were clearly contrary to national policy and would normally be construed as open defiance of civilian authority. Actually, however, there was no indication that the general was being insubordinate in the MacArthur tradition. Events of recent weeks suggest that the Goldberg appeal has been pigeon-holed. Is that true? Does the Administration have anything to say about this tragic conflict between the words of the soldier and those of the statesman?

The general's attack on "recent unpatriotic acts here at home," with the implication that debate here comforts the enemy there, and his prediction that protests will prolong the war and "cost lives" were all sadly reminiscent of recent statements by the President and Secretary Rusk.

But they do not answer the grim questions.

What is really stiffening Hanoi's will—the protests of American critics or the expanded bombing of North Vietnam and steady escalation of the war?

Who really misunderstands the principle that "American democracy is founded on debate?" Is it the enemy, as the general alleges? Or is it the Johnson Administration which misunderstands this great principle and increasingly insists on equating dissent with disloyalty?

Is the most powerful nation on earth no longer capable of tolerating free discussion about the dead-end course of a war with a small, if fanatic adversary? Is the counsel of generals the last word in a war that is full of political complexity?

Gen. Westmoreland's address was the opening gun in the Administration's new home-front offensive. He has been invited to brief U. S. Governors and to address a joint session of Congress as well. His remarks will doubtless be a variation on the theme he played yesterday. But the tune is really being called by Washington and it is apparently hoped that the martial music will drown out the din of a steadily-escalating war and the sound of honest debate.

Paradoxically, the effort could gravely backfire. It will deepen the doubts of many Americans who detect a rising ascendancy of military influence in Washington and who resent appeals to jingoism. It may be construed in Hanoi and other capitals as a sign that the Administration had lost confidence in the capacity of civilian leaders to present their case to the American people.